

Pregnancy and postpartum PT

Helping mothers-to-be stay in shape

By David Ruderman
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Ending slowly, breathing deeply and staying flexible is a force multiplier? It is for the nine percent of the active duty Army that, according to the Defense Medical Epidemiological Database, is pregnant on any given day.

Having a successful pregnancy, a healthy birth and passing the Army Physical Fitness Test after convalescence is a major hurdle for many female soldiers. The fact that there is no standard, Army-wide approach for going through pregnancy prompted 104th Area Support Group health officials to pioneer a Pregnancy and Postpartum PT program designed to support healthy births

and better reintegration into the force afterward.

"I had so many soldiers calling me with their concerns," said Lori Pineda, 104th ASG health promotion coordinator. Pregnant soldiers arriving for PT were often told to "just sit over there" while their peers were put through their paces. "They were treated as if they had some kind of illness because they were pregnant," she said.

"At the same time the Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine Europe was putting together a standardized program. We went to U.S. Army Europe to see if they could mandate a program," she said. After assessing the issues involved in getting units to go along with a USAREUR-wide program Pineda decided to start locally. "I

thought I'm going to start small, one unit at a time." She got positive command response from the 141st Signal Battalion in Wiesbaden and 123rd Main Support Battalion in Dexheim, and with about \$3,000 of funding from a Health Promotion and Prevention Initiative

launched what has become a pilot program in Europe, the Pregnancy and Postpartum PT program.

The program is designed to help mothers-to-be have successful, healthy births and recover more quickly to resume their active duty responsibilities. The assumption is that expectant mothers who maintain their health and readiness through the PT regime will better maintain their height and weight standards and pass the APFT six months

after birth. APFT scores of the soldiers involved will be compared with their scores three and six months after giving birth. The final results, and an assessment of the overall program, will become available over the summer, said Pineda.

Being included in PPPT encourages pregnant soldiers to stay fit, she said. "Ninety-eight percent of the time when they see their peers exercising, they'll exercise too."

Three times a week

PT takes place three mornings a week, and a Tuesday morning class addresses aspects of health, pregnancy and baby wellness that can affect both the soldier and her baby. The HPPI funding is being used for exercise mats, water bottles and related training equipment.

"This takes a lot of support from

the agencies," said Pineda, pointing out that New Parent Support Groups, the health clinics, Army Community Service and the community occupational health nurses are all involved in monitoring participants and tracking the effectiveness of the program.

"We do the educational piece," said Paulette Cooke, NPSP home visitor in Wiesbaden. "There's NPSP, the occupational health nurse, the Wiesbaden Health Clinic. It's all medically and research based. It's the education we'd give any pregnant woman. We cover the anatomy and physiology, the discomforts of pregnancy, how the baby is growing, whatever week it is of their pregnancy."

"We go over relaxation, visualization and breathing techniques,"

said Cooke, a former soldier and registered nurse with a background in obstetrics.

"It's hard work," said Sgt. Letha Gutierrez, PPPT leader for 123rd MSB, who began training for her mission in August. "That's when I started all the paperwork and finding out what we needed to do. I'm currently with child also. I got confirmed back in July, and that's when my commander put me in charge of the pregnant soldiers in my company." Until then Gutierrez worked as a fuel handler with Company A, 123rd MSB. She is expecting her second child in March.

"At the time I was the squad leader in charge of nine soldiers with 12 pieces of equipment. It's my main job," Gutierrez began working with half a dozen pregnant soldiers in her company, but the program began to

grow and now includes the entire battalion. She now oversees about 35 women in the battalion's PPPT. Participants must square away the required paperwork and be medically screened before participating, she said.

"There are different exercises for different trimesters of pregnancy," said Gutierrez. "In the first and second trimester we do almost the same exercises strengthening, endurance and flexibility. In the second and third semesters we do the same exercises with others for conditioning, and Kegel exercises. The women are very responsive to the different exercises we do. They haven't seen them before and I explain what effects they have on different parts of our bodies."

"We take the exact same exer-

cises as normal PT would and modify them to make it a little less stressful," said Staff Sgt. James Fenney, exercise leader with the 141st Signal PPPT group. "There are some that are new, but they still work certain parts of the body."

Learning a lot

PPPT has broadened soldiers' perspectives and makes them feel included in the world outside their pregnancy, said Fenney. "The initial reaction for a lot of them was 'I want to go to my room and relax and stay in bed.' Now they're learning a lot. They didn't realize there were so many things to learn about their pregnancies. They also like the education portion. We're trying to hit every aspect the mother will go through, and they really get into it," he said.

Fenney learned a few things him-

self during a January training session for exercise leaders. "The training was really good. I'm single and I don't know really anything about having children, so I learned a lot. They had me wearing the empathy belly during the PT session [the empathy belly is a weighted smock worn over the stomach to simulate carrying a fetus]. Man, it was a learning experience because your whole center of gravity is different."

As the battalion re-enlistment NCO and Family Readiness liaison, Fenney can see the program's potential impact on manpower and readiness issues. It will have a positive effect if soldiers get with the program, he said. "Normally when you're pregnant you just didn't [take part in PT]. So I hope it works. It'll only work if the mothers put their part into the physical training."

Photos by
Cassandra Kardeke



Pregnant soldiers from 141st Signal Battalion work at staying in shape during Pregnancy and Postpartum Physical Training in Wiesbaden. Photo left: Pvt. 2 Carly Boles supports Pvt. 2 Christina Williams (left), and Staff Sgt. Carrie Smith helps Spc. Temple Jones in stretching the right way during a morning exercise session. Photo above: Sgt. 1st Class Steven Groshe instructs Williams and Jones in leg exercises designed for the first trimester of pregnancy.

"It's a very set and tried out method," said Capt. Kathy Reynolds, chief nurse in Büdingen. As a former family nurse practitioner assigned to 212th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and attached to Wiesbaden Health Clinic, she was involved in getting the program running for 141st Signal. "The goal is to help them come back into regular PT. You don't atrophy so much. As long as it doesn't jeopardize the pregnancy."

One medical expert per health clinic is dedicated to monitoring PPPT participants and being available as needed. Reynolds checked pregnant soldiers' medical histories and present states of health that would make it unsafe for them to be involved. "If they're high risk I get them out of the PT part quickly, but they can still participate

in the educational part of the program," she said.

In addition to the physical benefits PPPT may bring to soldiers, it also fights against the social isolation that sometimes accompanies pregnancy.

"There is more support now through this program, and more understanding from the units and the commanders," said Cooke. "The complicated part, on top of being pregnant, is that they're soldiers. How do you cope

with that? The soldiers want this because they want to lose the weight appropriately. They have so many questions. They're educated and they want to know."

"Thus far we've had some very positive comments. They were talking about maybe getting T-shirts if there's any money left over as a kind of morale booster," said Reynolds.



Exercise leader Staff Sgt. James Fenney wears an empathy belly while working out with pregnant soldiers of 141st Signal Battalion in Wiesbaden.